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ABSTRACT

The work of English specialists is taking place in a changing context, exemplified in a fusion of elements from new technology, personal growth, and critical theory. Rather than replacing the old with the new, English specialists are incorporating the best of the past with the most interesting and productive pedagogical implications of the present. Information technology has paved the way for the transformation of English into a dynamic subject in the twenty-first century. Because the new technologies confirm and institutionalize so many critical theory principles, post-structuralist theory can at last play its promised transformative and empowering role. In the constant change of this evolving technocultural world, what intellectual reference points can instructors offer students? Instructors must encourage students to be alert to the forces which position them and which have positioned readers and readings throughout history. If the instructor's role is encouraging students to read culture and add to that culture through their own text-making, then a model is created that allows for both canonical and non-canonical subject matter. (EF)

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Exploring The Metropolis

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In Paul Auster's *City of Glass*, the first part of The New York Trilogy, the reader is introduced to the enigmatic Peter Stillman, a troubled man whose fife is dedicated to the search for an absolute universal language, one that will supercede our present languages and be able to represent more faithfully the changed world in which we are now living. Stillman has checked into the Hotel Harmony on Broadway and 99th, and observed only by Quinn, a mystery writer who has turned detective, he begins a series of apparently aimless walks around the streets of New York City. At first Quinn is puzzled, but then, by recording these journeys on a street map, he realizes that in making these walks Stillman is tracing patterns, and that each expedition from his hotel results in the making of a single letter of the alphabet. Quinn becomes excited, wondering what message is being written. Unfortunately he has missed the first four of Stillman's journeys, and after three days has to puzzle over the significance of O-W-E.

This sense of seeing something unfold, something new take shape, something fresh being formed was a feeling shared by many of us in the **Metaphors and Models** strand of the conference. Umberto Eco has said that every novel is a detective novel, in that what keeps us going is the "What happens next?" question, and that sense of being part of an intriguing narrative was what made being a member of the Metaphors and Models such a pleasurable and exciting experience for me. I would like to convey some of this excitement by summarizing some of the ideas which were discussed, in particular the exciting possibilities of a fusion of elements taken from new technology, personal growth, and critical theory. As for the context, for me the setting was a great stimulus: I cannot think of a city more suggestive of the twenty first century, than New York. As I walked, caught a bus, cab or subway train to my 34th Street hotel there were daily reminders of the changing contexts in which our work as English specialists takes place. In a futuristic City of Glass, divisions between home, school, workplace and street become less defined. This was our starting point. Beginning with a questioning of the boundaries, and the changing relationships within the new techno-corporate urban environment our subgroup started to interrogate old models and construct new ones, and here I must pay tribute to the contributions of Bill Green, Patricia Watson and our Chair for providing us with scaffolding within which many of us felt able to build.

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So what was it we discussed?

By way of a preface, let me insert a historical and cultural note to explain the specific perspective of someone working in the United Kingdom. Discussion of English teaching in England generally doesn't reflect the dominant shift in the current published writing about English, the shift towards critical literacy and Post-Age frameworks, of the kind discussed by Bill Green, Annette Patterson and Peter Medway. It must be significant that two of these are Australian, and the third is working in Canada. In England, the painful birth of the National Curriculum--a creature not unlike Rosemary's Baby, delivered with along with a series of attendant horrors--has tended to dominate teachers' thinking to the point of exhaustion. Primary and secondary school teachers have been able to think of little else. The one striking exception to this curricular paralysis is the work being done by the National Council for Education Technology, for if there is one force more powerful than a National Curriculum it is that generated by the I.T. revolution. To say so is a cliche, of course, and there is much accompanying hyperbole. But in England it is NCET, and those who are not grappling with the daily bureaucracy of the National Panopticon, who have had the space to outline the implications of Post-Age thinking. Here is an A Level moderator, Jane Ogborn, describing her model of English.

> [Students] need to recognize the importance of considering a text's means of production, its historical and social context, literature's place in different cultures, the effects which our gender, race and class have on the meanings we make from a text, and the insights critical theory offers us into the possibilities of plural readings of any text. (Ogborn, 1990, 15)

Ogborn then goes on to consider ways in which students should be encouraged to make meaning and develop their own responses, and here the language is very much of Britton, of writing from experience, of the power of expression, but all allied with an encouragement to

> Learn to tolerate uncertainty and confusion when they read, to feel that it's all right to change their minds about a text on later readings and to understand that any critic is also expressing only a partial and incomplete reading, however authoritative it might seem. (Ogborn, 1990, 15)

In the end, then, it is not a question of a new orthodoxy -- critical literacy -- replacing the old: the now not so new English. Rather it is [Peter Medway's reading of Britton (Medway 1995) and Bill Green's reading of Moffett (Green 1995) show how this can be done] the incorporation of the best of the past into the most interesting and productive pedagogical implications of the present. This eclectic weaving of new tapestries, new webs, is what our discussion seemed to reveal about the ways in which specialists across the world are coping with a period of tremendous instability, questioning, government pressure and theoretical ferment.

> "People say that life is the thing but I prefer reading" (Logan Pearsall Smith, *Afterthoughts*)

English traditionally has its roots in print -- publishing. If you ask specialists in schools, colleges and universities what drew them to English, they will invariably refer to the sense of satisfaction and fulfilment provided by reading. In England relatively few specialists will say that what drew them to English was writing, performance, media analysis or the possibilities opened up by the new technologies, though these are -- or soon will be -- significant elements or organizing principles in the practice of English. A good number of students will refer to the opportunities for discussion provided by English, though it does not seem to be essential that this discussion is centered on what is traditionally known as imaginative literature. What seems to be important is the notion of English as a personal subject, whether this is articulated loosely as "how the things we discuss relate to me" or more theoretically as "how things we engage with position us as subjects: the making of subjectivity." English is seen to provide space for such experiences, and it may account for English's popularity. It certainly seems to account for the fact that in a recent survey of truancy in one of the London boroughs, English was the subject from which students were least likely to be truant.

Inevitably we looked at the relationship of a transformation of English to the practices known as Cultural Studies. The Cultural Studies movement, which grew out of the English Department at Birmingham, was innovative in a number of ways, not least in its willingness to embrace critical theory; but although television, film and music were commonplace in the 1960's, they were still seen as add-on by many English teachers. In Derrida's concept of the supplementary, representation through language is itself an add-on, so that what we are always discussing is at the margins, that is the representation through language itself What we use as the agency to transmit messages transforms those messages and is instrumental in shaping the way we think. The arrival and spread of IT. -- a space in which the visual, print and sound can be integrated in ways that mean that print text is neither discrete nor dominant -- has made it more easy for us to imagine the kind of transformation of English that is possible and necessary if it is going to be a dynamic subject in the twenty first century. Ironically, it is the fact that the practices of the new technologies confirm and institutionalize so many of the principles that inform critical theory -- the collaborative, dialogic nature of text-making, the significance of gatekeepers, the resistance to closure, the fragmentation of experience -- that post-structuralist theory, supported by democratic pedagogics and a Vygotskian emphasis on social learning and production, can at last play the transformative and empowering role that has always been its promise.

Different environment, different lens

English may have its roots in print publishing, but as we have suggested, the landscape around it has changed in significant ways. These ways were summarized at the conference by Gunther Kress.

A number of interrelated factors -- globakation of economics, of cultures; intensifying technological change; and deepening cultural and ethnic diversity -- are producing an accelerating dynamic of fragmentation. Three major casualties of the resultant changes are

older conceptions of nation; of subjectivity and identity; and the centrality of language; and with these a whole host of ideas and values which rested on them. In this context a fundamental rethinking of the English curriculum is needed: What should it be? and even more urgently, what should it be for?

This sets us a great challenge, assuming that we reject the idea that it is business as usual and that we can ignore the world our students inhabit and will be inhabiting in the twenty-first century. For theirs is a world in which technology is not just an addition to learning it frames learning. If this technocultural world is characterized by constant change and instability, by a celebration of difference, by an information explosion and cross-national electronic mail system that enables them to talk to people in America and Australia as easily -- perhaps more easily -- than they talk to us, what intellectual reference points can we offer students to help them get a grip on this change? By what means can we best empower students, so that they are not simply agents and agencies, but also intellectual trouble markers?

One way is to build on the best pedagogical elements of personal growth (the emphasis on the students' own production), the rigor of critical theory, and the intellectual transformation being brought about by I.T. Bill Green offered us a formulation which drew on the relationship between these elements. This is represented in the following diagram, which draws on a Kress's schemata of texts:

Aesthetic		
Culturally Salient	Production/ "Writing"	Language and/in technology
Mundane (Everyday)		

The texts are what we work with, and Kress's taxonomy is a useful way of discussing the differing status accorded to texts.

The word "writing" is being used in the broad sense in which Derrida uses it, as a term which displaces the speech-writing binary, and is used without fixity or closure, characterized by a necessary undecidability. As Green explains:

> "Writing" understood in this way involves working with differences, or difference, in the play of meaning. (Green, 1995)

So we move towards providing students with a sense of control by creating what Kress calls "a culture of innovation." This goal draws on our great strength, which has been the attention given to pedagogy, to production, to "writing." Production/reproduction are the means of resisting the forces of determinism, transmission, and elitism that are the dangers inherent in some of the changes identified by Kress, in the multi-national consumer capitalist model, dangers which we are all aware. Examples surround us of this division between those who have access to technology and those who do not. Those of us in universities do not have to look far. The Open University, which used to send out a basic

cheap tape recorder to all those who registered with it, now assumes that its students will have access to I.T. Art and Education are always political and it must be our job to encourage students to be alert to the forces which position them and which have positioned readers and readings throughout our history. Why was Marlowe censored? English, as no other subject, has the capacity and responsibility (because no one else will do it) to encourage the viewing of texts through this particular critical lens, and if we see our role as encouraging students to read culture and add to that culture through their own text-making, then we have a model for the practice of English that allows for both canonical and non-canonical subject matter. It is the lens which matters, and the awareness that there is always a lens. Whatever is used to filter experience -- language, novel, biography -- will have its own focal points. Nothing is transparent; nothing is to be ignored.

For me the conference was a stimulating and provocative experience. I do not think we broke any molds; I do not think we have reached the kind of watershed that was reached at Dartmouth. I think it is unlikely that there will be similar watersheds, because we have started to unpack the very notion of sudden, universal changes. There are specific schools, specific language practices and specific cultures. The specificity of experience, rather than the grand narrative, is the intellectual focus that characterizes the late twentieth century. By the end of *The City of Glass* Quinn has worked out the message that Peter Stillman was tracing during his walks, and it should be a warning to all of us who look for grand, universal solutions. Stillman's message is "The Tower of Babel" and rather than becoming wedded to single models/towers, such as genre, personal growth or any of the post structuralist models, we should engage with them all, and take the best from all of them. Models are always suspect, we concluded, and always provisional, but these metaphorical structures can be useful if we see them as a kind of transparent palimpsest, always building on what went before, and never seeking to erase it. Helping our students live with difference, helping them have some control over the siren song of information, that is the challenge. For me the discussion in the Metaphors and Models strand offered some exciting thoughts on the way that this might be possible.

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